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# Review of

## *Personal Value*, T. Rønnow-Rasmussen

(to appear in *Dialectica*)

Toni, Rønnow-Rasmussen: *Personal Value*, Oxford University Press: Oxford: 2011, 185 pp. 75 \$\$ (Hardcover), ISBN 978-0-19-960378-7

The poem that his daughter once wrote for him is valuable for Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen in a way that it is not for others. But saying that the poem is valuable *for* him is not the same as saying that it is valuable *according* to him. First, because it cannot be prejudged that the poem would not be valuable for him had he no knowledge of it. Second, because even if the poem could not be valuable for him without being valuable according to him, there are plenty of other things that he might find valuable without finding them valuable *for* him. Personal values, Rønnow-Rasmussen argues, are therefore not to be equated with mere subjective values: they are rather kinds of values—good *for*—to be contrasted with impersonal values—good, *period*. They constitute the *explananda* of *Personal Value*.

The *explanans* Rønnow-Rasmussen puts forward has two ingredients:

1. The *fitting (or buck-passing) analysis of values* (FA), according to which an object's positive value consists in there being normative reasons to favour that object. These reasons are provided by lower-order properties of the value-bearer, which constitute the supervenience base of the value (not to be conflated with its constitutive ground, as we shall see).
2. A *sui generis* type of attitude: *for-someone's-sake*-attitudes, attitudes we have towards objects "with some person in mind". Such attitudes are meant to be simple: favouring the poem for Toni's sake is not having a first attitude towards the poem

and a second attitude towards Toni; is it one single attitude: favouring the poem with an eye to Toni.

Combining these two ingredients, Rønnow-Rasmussen proposes the following *Fitting Analysis of Personal value* (FAP) :

FAP: An object  $x$ 's value for a person  $a$  (i.e.  $x$ 's personal value), consists in the existence of normative reasons for favouring/disfavouring  $x$  for  $a$ 's sake (Rønnow-Rasmussen, 2011, 47).

FAP is meant to be very encompassing. Rønnow-Rasmussen explains how FAP can be refined so as to distinguish, for instance, final from instrumental personal values, or intrinsic from extrinsic personal values. Moreover, in the course of his defence of FAP, the Danish/Swedish philosopher persistently points out that FAP remains neutral with respect to many substantive issues. Thus, FAP does not say *which* things are of personal value; neither does FAP say *whether* there are some things of personal value; FAP is even neutral with respect to the subjectivism/objectivism issue concerning personal values. One could endorse FAP and be a subjectivist about personal values: in order to do so, one would need to adopt a subjective rather than objective stance on the reasons figuring in the *analysans*.

There is, however, one substantial view about personal values that FAP readily rules out. Naïve realism about personal values is the view that personal values are unanalysable axiological properties of their bearers. The naïve realist about personal values adopts towards personal values the kind of approach that Moore adopts towards impersonal values. Surprisingly, Rønnow-Rasmussen never seriously considers naïve realism about personal values<sup>1</sup>. Even if naïve realism about personal values is ignored, and entailed to be false, the naïve realist can still find much to agree with in *Personal Value*. For he might accept the bi-conditional underlying FAP:  $x$  is good for  $a$  iff  $x$  ought to be favoured for  $a$ 's sake. Such a naïve realist will say, in contrast to FAP, that it is because the poem is good for Toni that Toni ought to favour it for his own sake.

*Personal Value* contains ten chapters. In spite of the impressive range of issues

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<sup>1</sup> One reason is perhaps that Moore himself rejected primitive personal values. Yet naïve realism about personal value is not entirely unprecedented: Hartmann (1932, vol. 1, 206-9) defends some platonistic version of it.

covered, the book displays a tight unity: with the exception of Chapter Ten—which presents a novel argument in favour of value-bearer pluralism—all other chapters closely pursue the defence of FAP. Chapter One sets the stage by introducing important axiological distinctions, in particular the distinction between the supervenience base and the constitutive ground of a value. Chapters Two, Three and Five introduce and defend the two key ingredients of FAP: Chapters Two and Three focus on FA and some central objections to it; Chapter Five focuses on for someone's sake attitudes. Chapter Six integrates the results of the preceding chapters so as to spell out FAP in detail. Chapters Seven and Eight address important objections to FAP. Chapters Four and Nine consider and rebut alternative approaches to personal values (Moore's skepticism with respect to personal value; the view that  $x$  is good for  $S$  iff  $x$  ought to be favoured *because*  $S$  favours  $x$ ; and the view that personal values amount to agent-relative values).

Although the book on the whole forms a remarkably integrated whole, its fine-grained organisation is occasionally murkier. The unity of some chapters is not obvious, some issues recur in different chapters (such as Moorean objections to personal value), and questions are often pinpointed as “to be dealt with later” (though they always are). Even so, *Personal Values* is a delightful and enlightening read. It is teeming with novel insights, ground-breaking distinctions, rich examples, new delineations of the field, refreshing historical reminders, inventive arguments, unprecedented connections, identifications of neglected difficulties, and pioneering proposals.

I shall focus here on three of these insights, which are illustrative of the pervasive scrupulousness and inventiveness of the book. The first is that there is a distinction between the supervenience base of values and their constitutive grounds. The second is that FA is admittedly circular (because pro-attitudes have values as formal objects), but that this circularity is benign. The third proposal is that one important kind of for-someone-sake's attitude—prototypically, love—is such that it is not justified by the properties it represents its object as exemplifying. This is a small sample of claims not meant to be representative of the book. The reason I have chosen to discuss these in particular is that, while finding them plausible and significant, I believe that each raises a worry that Rønnow-Rasmussen fails to address properly. I shall tentatively suggest a

possible solution in each case.

## 1. Supervenience base and constitutive ground

One might be tempted to think that a subjectivist about values—the view that for  $x$  to be good is for  $x$  to be the object of some pro-attitude—is committed to the view that pro-attitudes belong to the supervenience base of positive values. Subjectivism would thereby entail that all values are extrinsic. Rønnow-Rasmussen points out (Chap. 1) that this way of understanding subjectivism is misleading. If it were true, subjectivism and objectivism would not be offering competing accounts of intrinsic values. Instead, subjectivism would simply be denying the possibility of intrinsic values. This is bad news no so much for subjectivism itself than for our very understanding of the subjectivism/objectivism debate. Our framing of the debate should be such that the subjectivist and the objectivist are in a position to disagree on the nature of intrinsic values.

To deal with this worry—and further ones—Rønnow-Rasmussen introduces an important distinction, from earlier works with Wlodek Rabinowicz (Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen, 2000) between the *supervenience base* of values, and their *constitutive grounds* (pp. 9–18). All values, he claims, supervene, a priori, on lower-order properties (typically, natural properties). Constitute grounds, Rønnow-Rasmussen urges, should not be conflated with supervenience bases. The subjectivist and the objectivist about values might agree on the supervenience base of a given value; but they will disagree on its constitutive ground: for the subjectivist, the subject's attitudes will belong to that constitutive ground, for the objectivist the constitutive ground and the supervenience base will be equated (pp. 13–18). Hence, the distinction between the supervenience base and constitutive grounds helps explain why the subjectivist is not committed to all values being extrinsic, and why the subjectivist and the objectivist might agree on the supervenience base of intrinsic values.

The distinction between the supervenience base and constitutive grounds is very illuminating. However, intuitively, it faces an important dilemma:

- Either the supervenience base is *sufficient* for the value to accrue to its bearer, but

then the constitutive ground is superfluous. The subjectivist's attitudes play no role; values are there anyway.

- Or the supervenience base is *not sufficient* for the value to accrue to its bearer, but then is it not properly speaking a *supervenience* base.

In other words, the supervenience base and the constitutive ground seem to be competing grounds for the value. Although Rønnow-Rasmussen speaks of “supervenience”, he insists that he wants to capture some stronger relation: all values accrue to their bearer *in virtue of* some lower-order properties (p. 11). Rønnow-Rasmussen keeps the “ground” talk for constitutive grounds, but in effect the supervenience base is also a ground of the value—and it has to be a *complete* ground. Subjectivism is then equated with the view that although lower-order properties *completely* ground axiological ones, some *further* subjective attitudes are needed, on top of these complete natural grounds, to *constitutively* ground the value. This sounds inconsistent: if further attitudes are needed to ground the values, then the “supervenience” base is not completely grounding the value.

Let me hazard two possible ways of rescuing the supervenience base/constitutive ground distinction from this dilemma (both are inspired by some comments made by Rønnow-Rasmussen, though I am not sure he would endorse either of them).

(i) The first distinguishes between *subjective and objective grounds*. The subjectivist might say that a value is intrinsic when, *in the eyes of the subject*, the lower-order properties of the bearers completely ground its values. Of course, the subject is then wrong, for according to subjectivism, his own attitudes *also* ground the value. Subjectivism, then, could equate intrinsic values with the values that (wrongly) *seem* to supervene on the lower-order properties of the bearer. The supervenience base would be equated with the subjective complete ground of values (which excludes the attitude); the constitutive ground would be equated with the objective ground (which includes the attitude). The supervenience base is subjectively sufficient for the value to be exemplified, but the constitutive ground is objectively required. Although the subjectivist would then be committed to the view that all values are extrinsic, he could still be in a position to make sense of the concept of intrinsic value.

(ii) A second, perhaps better, way out of the dilemma appeals to *embedded grounds*.

The idea is to understand the supervenience base/constitutive ground distinction in terms of an explanation embedded in another. The subjectivist's view would amount to the following:

Subjectivism:

(values accrue to their bearers completely in virtue of their natural base) in virtue of some subjective attitudes.

Within the bracket is the first order view, on which subjectivists and objectivists (might) agree. Outside the brackets lies the (meta-ethical) battlefield: objectivism denies the outer, wide-scope, “in virtue of”. The reason why the subjectivist's constitutive grounds for values—attitudes—do not belong to their supervenience base is akin to the reason why the *modus ponens* is not itself a premise of the *modus ponens*. The subjectivist's attitudes are supposed to explain why values supervene on the lower-order properties they do; they do not belong themselves to these lower-order properties. Although Rønnow-Rasmussen does not make this suggestion explicitly, it seems in line with his claim that subjectivism and objectivism are second-order, meta-ethical, views on values. This suggestion, however, clashes with the letter of some other claims he makes: for according to it, the subjectivist's view is not that attitudes constitutively ground values, but that attitudes ground the fact that natural properties ground values.

## **2. Formal objects and circularity**

In Chapter 2, Rønnow-Rasmussen recalls an objection to the fitting-analysis of value (FA—the first ingredient of FAP) from W.D. Ross, according to which pro-attitudes are value-loaded in the following sense: to have a pro-attitude towards *x* entails thinking that *x* is good in some way. Pro-attitudes, in scholastic jargon, have formal objects: judgments, thoughts, or presentations of values. But if pro-attitudes essentially involve evaluations, the objection goes, then any conceptual analysis of values in terms of pro-attitudes is doomed to circularity, for the concept of value is implicitly present in the *analysandum*.

Rønnow-Rasmussen, in his relentless quest for neutrality, intends to answer Ross's objection without rejecting the view that pro-attitudes essentially involve evaluations. He therefore consistently concedes that no *definition* of values in terms of pro-attitudes can be given. What then could be the point of FA?

Relying on a proposition given by Skorupski (2007), Rønnow-Rasmussen argues that without defining values, one can nevertheless give an account of the *possession* or *acquisition* of value-concepts in terms of pro-attitudes (pp. 31–2). The proposed story runs as follows. Start with Paul, who does not yet grasp the concept of moral wrongness. Since the attitude of blame, *ex hypothesis*, essentially involves negative moral evaluation, explaining to Paul that the morally wrong amounts to the blame-worthy—following FA—will be of no help to him. But, Skorupski and Rønnow-Rasmussen argue, Paul can become familiar with blame through an “independent characterization” that brackets its evaluative component. In particular, Paul can individuate the sentiment of blame through the way blame feels or through the actions blame disposes him to perform. Once familiar with blame in this evaluation-free way, Paul can then judge that some instances of blame are supported by reasons. That is, he can grasp the idea of blame-worthiness, i.e., the idea of moral wrongness. This way, Paul has acquired the concept of moral value through blame, although blame essentially involves moral evaluation. So goes the proposal. Accordingly, FA should be read as a theory about the possession or acquisition of value-concepts, rather than as a definition of values.

I find this answer unconvincing. First, that the subjective feel of blame is value-free is questionable. Evaluations—presentations, feelings, or perceptions of values—have long been claimed to be essential to the phenomenology of emotions.

But let us grant that some “independent characterization” of blame (through some value-free subjective feel or action tendencies) is possible. Note that with such a characterization in hand, Paul remains ignorant of the essential evaluative aspect of blame: all he knows about blame is its value-free feel or its action tendencies. Hence, to say that he has thereby become familiar with *blame* is a bit of an overstatement: a more cautious claim would be that Paul has thereby become familiar with *some parts* or *aspects* of blame (namely: its feel, its action-tendencies). But if so, it becomes doubtful



that Paul can judge that *such blame-aspects* are worthy or fitting. For first, it is unclear that such evaluation-free aspects of blame are supported by reason; and second, if they are supported by reason, then they plausibly are so *because of the evaluative aspect of blame*. Remove all evaluation from blame: whatever the residue is, it is unlikely that it can meaningfully be said to be a fitting or unfitting attitude. Hence Paul, who, *ex hypothesis*, does not access the evaluative part of blame, might not after all be in a position to judge that its non-evaluative parts—the only ones he knows of—are fitting or unfitting.

But let us grant that the concept of blame-worthiness can nevertheless be acquired this way. Then a third problem arises: for what does the concept *blame-worthiness* have to do with that of *moral wrongness*? Recall that Rønnow-Rasmussen and Skorupski have agreed, in order to avoid vicious circularity, that moral wrongness cannot be *defined* in terms of blame-worthiness. So on what grounds are we to claim that if Paul grasps blame-worthiness, he is thereby “in a position to grasp moral wrongness” (p. 32)? The definitional bridge between values and fitting attitudes has just been destroyed. Lacking any other another bridge, values remain out of reach. Paul has acquired the concept of a fitting-attitude. But has still no idea about values.

Finally, let us grant that FA can still be read as providing a story about the acquisition of value-concepts rather than a story about the acquisition of fitting-attitude concepts. Yet another worry is thrown up. For FA, so construed, cannot even claim to explain how we *actually* come to possess value-concepts. The only thing that has been argued for is that there is a *possibly* non-circular way of explaining the acquisition of value concepts in terms of fitting attitudes. No argument has been given to the effect that this route to value-concepts is *the only* one, nor that it is even *an actual* one. Nothing excludes that values can be accessed more directly: by intuition, emotions, feelings, etc. This is very disappointing: we were promised a fitting *analysis of values*, and we end with a shaky story about one *possible way of acquiring value-concepts*.

In fact, Rønnow-Rasmussen himself seems to have higher ambitions for FA. In spite of his official adhesion to the “acquisition” reading of FA, he keeps on writing as if the analysis of values is really at stake. Outside of the discussion of Ross’s objection, he

continues to formulate FA in terms of “values” (not “value-concepts”) being “*constituted by*”, “*equated with*”, “*identical with*”, or “*analyzed in terms of*” the existence of reasons to favour their bearer. Nowhere else in the book do we find FA spelled out in terms of *value-concepts being acquired* in virtue of the existence of reason to favour their bearer. Personal values, not the acquisition of the concept of personal values, are the real *explananda* of the book—and rightly so.

There is perhaps a better way out of Ross’s objection. Rather than endorsing the possession-reading of FA, Rønnow-Rasmussen could join forces with Humberstone (1997), as he did in earlier papers (see in particular Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen, 2006), and to whom he ends up alluding (p. 32, n. 44). Humberstone agrees that it is indeed badly circular to *define* (“reductively analyse” in his terminology) the concept *F* by appealing to *F* itself. But instead of moving towards an account of the *possession* of the concept *F* as an alternative, Humberstone suggests that we can explain, not what the concept consists in, but *when* it applies. His proposal, as I understand it, is that although the *intension* of the concept cannot be accounted for if the concept figures in the right-hand side of the explanation, its *extension* can still be accounted for in that way provided the concept appears under the scope of a “protective” operator. Suppose “*S blames x*” essentially involves “*x seems morally wrong to S*”. This indeed forbids *defining* moral wrongness in terms of blame. But one can still non-vacuously explain *when* the concept of moral wrongness applies in terms of blame, for “*S blames x*” does not involve “*x is morally wrong*”, but only “*x seems morally wrong*”. “Seem”, not being factive, is a protective operator.

This possible reply to Ross, however, still focuses on value *concepts*, not yet on value *properties*. As such, it remains at odds with the general metaphysical inflection of *Personal Value*. But perhaps Humberstone’s story has a metaphysical counterpart. Distinguishing the *nature* of values from their *existence*, one might grant that their nature cannot be elucidated in terms of pro-attitudes, because of Ross’s circularity worry. But, one might then urge, their *existence* still stands in need of explanation. Such an explanation, on this proposal, is precisely what FA provides. FA does not account for what values are, but for the conditions under which values exist, i.e. are exemplified. Although the nature of goodness is left unexplained by FA, what we learn through FA is

when and how this unexplained goodness accrues to some bearers: namely, when there are reasons to favour these bearers. In other words, FA could be understood as saying that a value (whose nature is not addressed—it could be primitive or not) is exemplified by a bearer, iff, and because, this bearer is worthy of being favoured. FA, in short, tells us not what values are, but how values land on their bearers.

How does that answer Ross's objection? Crucially, the appearances, seemings, or presentations of values admittedly essential to pro-attitudes, are not factive: *seeming good* does not entail *being good*. Hence, no bad circularity ensues from explaining exemplifications of values (partly) through presentations of values. In sum, a more promising answer to Ross's objection, hopefully in tune with the spirit of *Personal Value*, could be to concede that FA does not account for the nature of value, but to insist that it only targets their existence, therefore avoiding any vicious circularity.

### 3. Love and butterflies

For-one-sake's attitudes (FSS) constitute one of the main innovations of *Personal Values*. After having characterized FSS attitudes in detail, Rønnow-Rasmussen introduces a distinction between two kinds of FSS whose paradigmatic examples are *admiration* and *love*. When Paul admires Julie, the properties of Julie represented in the content of his attitude provides an answer to the question “*Why—for what reason—*does he admire her?”. When Paul loves Julie, on the other hand, the properties of Julie represented in the content of his attitude do not provide reason for his love: they only help to *identify* the beloved. Paul admires Julie because she is courageous, but he does not love her because she has blond hair<sup>2</sup>. Love is not *justified* by the represented properties of the beloved: “we do not so much love a person *for* his or her properties as we love her *regardless of* his and her properties”, “we are struck by the attitude”, “we find ourselves merely having it”, we have it “for no reason”; things we cannot say about admiration.

More generally, there is then a distinction between FSS attitudes that are justified by the properties they represent their object as having (like admiration), and, on the other hand FSS attitudes that are not justified by such properties (like love). In the later case,

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<sup>2</sup> As Rønnow-Rasmussen stresses, the “because” in question is not the causal because, but the because of justification.

the properties attributed to the object *only* play the role of *identifiers*, not of *justifiers*. Rønnow-Rasmussen calls such love-like attitudes “Identity-FSS attitudes”, and he argues further that they are likely to be the ones at play in the most interesting cases of personal values (hence, the final formulation of FAP, p. 78, makes clear that the pro-attitude appearing in the *analysans* are Identity-FSS attitudes).

That distinction between two kinds of FSS is plausible and illuminating. One worry, however, of which Rønnow-Rasmussen is aware, is that the idea that love lacks justifiers appears to clash with the view that values supervene, as a matter of conceptual necessity, on non-evaluative properties. As Rønnow-Rasmussen insists (pp. 10–11), values are not butterflies: they do not directly alight on their bearers. It is a matter of conceptual necessity that they alight on their bearers in virtue of the lower-order, typically non-evaluative, properties of such bearers. But if love is an identity-FSS attitude, then to love corresponds some butterfly value, which alights on the beloved without further ado, independently of any non-evaluative ground. How are we to reconcile love, and other Identity-FSS attitudes, with the view that value supervenes, as a matter of conceptual necessity, on the property of their bearers?

Rønnow-Rasmussen’s answer is that values, in such cases, supervene not on the person’s *properties*, but instead on the person’s *identity*: “It is not my beloved’s possession of the property *W* that justifies my love for him or her. Rather, it is the identity of the person that appears to have that function” (p. 70). A person can be “what value supervene on” (Rønnow-Rasmussen, 2008, §6).

The problem with this answer is that by allowing substances to count as supervenience bases, we end up blurring the distinction between higher-order properties (such as values) and some butterfly, first-order, properties. Properties that accrue to their bearer *in virtue of these bearers themselves*, or *because of the identity of such bearers* are not necessarily supervenient properties. They might be essential properties (admittedly, not all essential property are supervenient). Rønnow-Rasmussen’s proposal entails that there are two ways in which properties can be exemplified by their bearers independently of any lower-order property. First, the butterfly way: properties alighting directly on their bearer. Second, the personal value way: properties accruing to their bearer in virtue of these bearer themselves, or, in virtue of the identity of these bearers. In the case of

essential properties, this sounds like a distinction without a difference.

How else, then, can the view that love is an Identity-FSS be reconciled with the view that values, as a matter of conceptual necessity, accrue to their bearer in virtue of some non-evaluative ground? An alternative suggestion is to weaken the supervenience constraint, which Rønnow-Rasmussen equates with full grounding. The proposal is to replace it, in the case of love and related personal values, by *partial* grounding. What is special about love (and other Identity-FSS attitudes) is that love is only *partly* justified or grounded by the properties of the beloved. Romeo loves Juliet partly because of her eyes, hair, and sense of humour<sup>3</sup>, but not *only* because of these. Hence, in accordance with the supervenience intuition, the personal value that Juliet has for Romeo is not free-floating. There are normative reasons why Romeo loves Juliet. But, contrary to the supervenience intuition, these reasons are not jointly *sufficient* to explain his love. There is something unexplainable about Romeo's love. Love has some necessary, but no sufficient correctness conditions. That the supervenience intuition should be revised in the case of personal values is hardly surprising. A perfect duplicate of the drawing of Toni's daughter cannot be more or less beautiful or admirable than the original. But, as Rønnow-Rasmussen touches upon (p. 81), is it very likely to be less valuable for Toni.

To conclude, it should be stressed that none of quibbles above could have been raised had Rønnow-Rasmussen confined himself to a narrow defence of FAP. After all, FAP could have been defended while leaving it to the subjectivists and objectivists to identify the subject-matter matter of their disagreement; to the emotion theorists to reconcile FA with the view that emotions have values as formal objects; and to the philosopher of love to account for love's correctness conditions. Rønnow-Rasmussen's defence of FAP, by contrast, is supererogatory. All too often, value theorists analysing values in terms of emotions tend to shift the responsibility for a value-free analysis of emotions to philosophers of mind; and, on the other hand, emotions theorists analysing emotions in terms of values tend to shift the responsibility for an emotion-free conception of value to their fellow axiologists. By contrast, *Personal Value* never passes the buck. The analysis of personal values proposed significantly furthers our mapping of the mind. One main

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<sup>3</sup> Pace Rønnow-Rasmussen, such properties are not doomed to be only causes of his love, they might be genuine reasons for it.

achievement of the book is the characterization of an overlooked psychological kind, for-someone's-sake attitudes, which might constitute a genuine discovery. In this respect, as in many others, *Personal Value* should be of immense interest not only to value theorists and moral philosophers, but also to philosophers of mind and metaphysicians.

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